

# Framing Tobacco Control Policy for Rural Decision-Makers

BEST PRACTICES TO GUIDE YOUR COMMUNICATIONS



As tobacco control professionals working in rural communities, we know that many talking points associated with tobacco control policies may backfire with rural elected officials who believe freedom and personal choice outweigh any potential benefits of regulation. These officials are probably aware that tobacco use is an issue in their community, but regulatory policies may not seem like the preferred solution.

This leaves tobacco control professionals in a tough position, however, there is a great deal of evidence that shows if we frame our messages strategically, we can help conservative and libertarian-leaning elected officials understand how local policy action can prevent tobacco use and lead to healthier communities.

This material was developed by RISE (Rural Initiatives Strengthening Equity), the Statewide Coordinating Center for Rural Communities, to provide support to control professionals and advocates as they start conversations about policy change with local elected officials in rural communities. In this guide you will find best practices for developing effective communications (i.e., educational materials, presentations, media campaigns, and key messages).

## BEST PRACTICES #1

### Key Considerations in Message Development & Delivery



Regardless of political identity, most Americans think that tobacco use is ultimately an individual's choice, even if they are aware of the tobacco industry's targeted marketing tactics. Additionally, a majority think that if we educate people more about the dangers of tobacco, they will stop using it. While education is an important piece to reducing tobacco use, we know it's only one of the tools we use in our work.

These findings make it clear that as tobacco control professionals, we need to communicate to elected officials not only why the policies we work on are important, but how policy addresses the conditions that lead to tobacco use.

ROOT CAUSES OF TOBACCO USE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES	SOLUTIONS
Tobacco use is more socially accepted due to various external factors, including:	
<b>Higher number of tobacco retailers</b> (per 100,000 ppl)	<b>Tobacco retail licenses (TRL), retailer density policies</b>
<b>Affordability</b> of tobacco products	<b>Minimum pack/price &amp; flavored tobacco policies</b>
<b>Increased SHS exposure</b> at home and work	<b>Smokefree policies</b> (MUH, parks, downtown, etc.)
<b>Targeted marketing</b>	<b>Restrictions on tobacco ads, coupons, etc.</b>
<b>Lack of access to tobacco treatment resources</b> (geographic isolation)	<b>Organizational efforts for tobacco treatment</b>



### GET THE MESSAGE OUT

Work with your coalition and other stakeholders to identify respected community figures to disseminate your message. Instead of quoting the U.S. Surgeon General, ask a local, trusted figure to talk about how the issue has impacted your community.

## Bridge the gaps.

If our messages aren't specific about the problem and the solution, our audience will fill in the gaps with information that could be inaccurate and harmful. Our messages should include not only who is impacted, but how the health disparity came to be. This is especially important when addressing the tobacco-related disparities among marginalized communities due to harmful stereotypes.

WE SAY...	THEY THINK...	TRY INSTEAD...
<p><i>Rural communities have higher rates of tobacco use and tobacco-related disease.</i></p>	<p><i>This is an unfortunate, but inevitable outcome of people's choices.</i></p>	<p>Rural communities have not been given the same chance at a tobacco-free life due to certain conditions, like...</p>
<p><i>Our program serves communities that have been more impacted.</i></p>	<p><i>This seems inappropriate; universal solutions are fairer.</i></p>	<p>Our program strives to lift everyone up, especially communities where the opportunities to be healthy are limited.</p>
<p><i>Tobacco companies target youth.</i></p>	<p><i>They equally target everyone—that must not be the reason for differences in rates of use.</i></p>	<p>Tobacco companies understand that young people's brains are developing and being wired with lifelong habits—we have a role in keeping harmful tobacco products, like vapes and chew, out of reach of young people.</p>

### ENCOURAGE LEGACY THINKING



The desire to leave behind something positive and meaningful, a legacy, is especially significant in rural communities. Tapping into people's desire to have a positive impact on future generations can prompt them to act in the near-term. Incorporating the vision of a legacy into your messaging can help rural elected officials appreciate the gravity of their role.

## Be consistent.

Although it is a popular strategy to create a tailored message for an audience based on their political identity, this may come off as inauthentic in small, rural communities. Keeping a consistent core message bolsters your credibility and gives you the power of repetition—research has shown that public thinking is largely shaped by how many times people hear something.

It can be helpful, however, to shift the goals of your communication without abandoning your core message, depending on the stance of your audience.

- » **For example, when communicating with an official who is an immovable opponent, it is most effective to focus on anticipating their arguments.**
- » **If you are communicating with an official who is uncommitted and uninvolved about the issue, focus on explaining your point of view, but be aware that it may not be effective to try to persuade them.**
- » **And, if you are communicating with an ally, reinforce the message and equip them with information they can share with their fellow decision makers.**



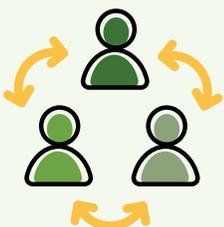
### LOCAL STORIES MAKE DATA MEANINGFUL

Couple relevant data with community member stories to paint a clearer picture of the problem. Storytelling is one of the most powerful tools we have because it puts a face on statistics that can feel abstract or are mistrusted. Local stories and examples from rural areas will have a stronger impact than statewide or urban examples.

## Position yourself as an important partner.

In many rural communities, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to distrust of government, most notably local public health departments. Because of this, it's more critical than ever that our messages signal that we are inviting everyone to engage, not just those who support or oppose our policies. Position your organization as a team player, instead of an all-knowing authority.

- » **For example, rather than saying, "listen to the experts," try, "let's talk about it." Furthermore, using phrases such as, "science is on our side" may be counterproductive in the current moment.**



### BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

It's especially important to lay a solid foundation for strong relationships with elected officials. Hold in-person meetings, attend community events, and get to know the individuals you want to do policy work with.

For more information on building relationships and strategizing policy work take a look at our [Policy Platform \(www.ca-rise.org/take-action/policy-platform/\)](http://www.ca-rise.org/take-action/policy-platform/).

## Neutral Language for Policy and Health Equity



Messages that signal to elected officials that it's "politics as usual," can make them closed off to anything else you have to say. Take care to use local stories from rural communities and avoid words that are closely identified with a particular political identity.

The table below has examples of language that have been tested with people across political ideologies.

RATHER THAN...	TRY...
<i>California law mandates/ Local policy mandates...</i>	Californians voted to/Local elected representatives agreed to...
<i>Bans/regulations (signals government control)</i>	Agreements/policies
<i>The government has a responsibility to step in to help communities that are struggling.</i>	It is important to restore the balance between people who are doing well and people who are struggling.
<i>Tobacco control ("control" signals regulation)</i>	Tobacco use prevention Prevent nicotine addiction Reduce tobacco use
<i>Cigarettes and other tobacco products</i>	Harmful tobacco products, like cigarettes, cigars, vapes, and chew
<i>People/children deserve... (can lead to judgment about "who deserves" to benefit)</i>	People/children thrive in communities that...

<p><i>Vulnerable/at risk/priority populations/ impacted communities/low income (suggests that the problem lies with the people rather than conditions)</i></p>	<p>Communities where the opportunities to be healthy are limited</p>
<p><i>Social determinants of health</i></p>	<p>Obstacles to/opportunities for health</p> <p>Health starts long before illness—in our homes, schools, and jobs.</p> <p>Health begins where we live, learn, work and play.</p>
<p><i>Health equity/social justice</i></p>	<p>Fairness</p> <p>Lifting everyone up</p> <p>Raising the bar for everyone</p> <p>Giving everyone a chance to lead a healthy life</p> <p>Everyone should have the opportunity to make the choices that allow them to live a healthy life, regardless of their income, education, or ethnic background.</p>
<p><i>The tobacco use rate in rural communities is unacceptable! (Using phrases that can end with an exclamation can create more polarization)</i></p>	<p>We can agree that tobacco use has a significant impact in rural communities.</p>



**COMBAT MISINFORMATION**

In many cases, the more times people hear something, the more likely they are to believe it. Therefore, when crafting a response to dispel misinformation, emphasize and normalize the truth (e.g., **"As we know..."**). Stay away from phrases that acknowledge the misinformation, such as, "Contrary to popular belief..."

## Framing Strategies from the RISE Policy Platform



### Show how youth and families will benefit.

To the extent that youth and families can be highlighted as beneficiaries of the proposed policy, the proposed policy will stand a better chance of adoption. For example, a smokefree parks policy can be framed as a way to ensure safe and attractive recreational opportunities for youth and families.

### Make the business case.

Conservative policy makers tend to be more supportive of a tobacco policy if they understand how the expected health benefits will be good for business. Chambers of commerce and other business associations often have great influence in rural communities and should be expected to push back against any proposed policies that could negatively impact businesses. Therefore, it is important to prepare effective counterarguments to their concerns and to recruit allies from the business community.

### Show how the policy is good for tourism.

With their proximity to national parks, a common concern in many rural communities is a robust tourism industry. Rural communities may be receptive to reducing tobacco consumption, secondhand smoke, and tobacco product waste to help attract tourists, especially those from urban areas who expect a tobacco-free environment.

### Show how the policy reduces wildfire risk.

In the aftermath of devastating wildfires affecting large swaths of the state, many rural communities are acutely aware of fire prevention strategies. There may be openness to efforts to limit smoking in outdoor areas and to reduce cigarette butt litter to help prevent wildfires.

### Show how the proposed policy addresses local conditions.

Conditions in a rural county may be very different from those in an urban county. For example, some mountain counties are as much as 90 percent national forest by landmass—land that is controlled by the federal government, not by local policy makers. Counties like these may achieve a greater reduction in tobacco use by adopting a policy of working with their national forest on wildfire reduction and environmental protection than on a local smokefree parks policy.

## Conclusion.

Passing tobacco control policy requires elected officials to reconsider a deeply entrenched belief that tobacco use is simply a result of bad choices, and we only need more effective education. It is our job to connect the dots between the structural and social factors that lead to tobacco use and policy solutions.

By framing the problem and policy solution in a way that honors rural values of individualism and fairness, we can help city councils, boards of supervisors, and other stakeholders see their support as historic, instead of extreme.

## Additional resources:

### POLICY TOOLS:

- » **RISE - Statewide Coordinating Center for Rural Communities:**  
[www.ca-rise.org/take-action/policy-platform/](http://www.ca-rise.org/take-action/policy-platform/)
- » **Stanford Social Innovation Review:**  
[ssir.org/articles/entry/six\\_ways\\_to\\_boost\\_public\\_support\\_for\\_prevention\\_based\\_policy](http://ssir.org/articles/entry/six_ways_to_boost_public_support_for_prevention_based_policy)

### COMMUNICATION TOOLS:

- » **Rural Health Information Hub:**  
[www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/health-promotion/2/strategies/health-communication](http://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/toolkits/health-promotion/2/strategies/health-communication)
- » **Geographic Health Equity Alliance/CADCA:**  
[www.geohealthequity.org/how-to-engage-rural-communities-with-strategic-communications/](http://www.geohealthequity.org/how-to-engage-rural-communities-with-strategic-communications/)
- » **Dialogue4Health:**  
[dialogue4health.org/web-forums/detail/framing-health-equity-communication-strategies-that-work](http://dialogue4health.org/web-forums/detail/framing-health-equity-communication-strategies-that-work)  
**and** [www.dialogue4health.org/resource-library/detail/julie-sweetland-communicating-in-conservative-contexts-strategies-for-raisi](http://www.dialogue4health.org/resource-library/detail/julie-sweetland-communicating-in-conservative-contexts-strategies-for-raisi)
- » **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation:**  
[www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2010/01/a-new-way-to-talk-about-the-social-determinants-of-health.html](http://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2010/01/a-new-way-to-talk-about-the-social-determinants-of-health.html)

### RURAL PARTNERS CONTACT LIST

- » <https://www.ca-rise.org/resources/rural-partners-contact-list/>

### CA STATEWIDE COORDINATING CENTERS

- » **Coordinating Center for Rural Communities:** <https://www.ca-rise.org/about-us/>
- » **Tribal Community Coordinating Center:** <https://www.ca-tccc.org/>
- » **Asian Pacific Partners for Empowerment, Advocacy & Leadership:** <https://appealforhealth.org/>
- » **Latino Coordinating Center:** <https://healthcollaborative.org/hlcc/>
- » **LGBTQ Coordinating Center:**  
<https://health-access.org/healthier-california/california-lgbt-hhs-network/>
- » **African American Statewide Coordinating Center:** <https://www.amplify.love/>

